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Convention Address
of
Bishop Greer

November, 1914



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OF

BISHOP GREER

NOVEMBER 11th, 1914

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By transfer
The ~~White~~ House

It is again my privilege to meet with you in Convention and to bring to your notice some of the more distinctive tendencies of thought in the present age, in order that the Church may address itself with a more effective service to its present and proper work. I realize that this is not an easy thing to do, because it is always a difficult thing for a person to interpret the tendencies of the age of which he is himself a contemporary part, in that his vision of it, however clear-sighted, is a vision without the adequate perspective. And because further, the present age, with so many cross and counter currents in it, so many teachers teaching, so many prophets prophecying, so many oracles clamoring to be heard, and all of them speaking with the tacit assumption of an ex-cathedra authority, is an exceptionally difficult age to interpret and express. Someone has suggested that an appropriate sign or seal for the present age would be, as expressing on the one hand its insatiable curiosity and on the other the alleged or supposed apathy of the Church, the following design:

An Interrogation Point Rampant;
Three Bishops Dormant;
With the word "Query" written underneath.

That may not be a fitting characterization; I hope it is not altogether so; but then what other is? For it is, as I have said, a difficult age to define with anything like a definite and comprehensive statement. This difficulty has been made still more difficult of late by the sudden irruption into the modern world of a new, or rather an old, unexpected force which has thrown it out of joint with all established reckoning. And while this international and fratricidal strife, this holocaust of war, is indeed the engrossing topic of the hour and might perhaps be made

a topic by itself for this Convention address, yet there has been of late so much said about it both by press and pulpit, so many articles written and so many sermons preached, that there is apparently nothing new to be said, or not at least just now. And then too the present war is not representative of the present age. It is a reversion; or, in vulgar phrase, a throw-back, to a savage and barbarous age, and does not express or typify the sober thought of the people.

Let us then for a little while turn aside from this engrossing topic, from wars and rumors of wars, from an age drunk with passion, and try to hear and understand its underlying sober thought as we find that thought expressed in what may be regarded as its two interpreting voices,—the voice of its Philosophy and the voice of its Science. This may seem an ambitious classification for a brief Convention address and yet I hope its fitness will appear as we proceed; and possibly too we shall find that it is pointing out the way in which the Church should try to heal and cure the age of its conflicts and its strifes, to give it the blessing of peace and to bring it back to God.

First, then let us consider the voice of the current philosophy. The distinguished publicist, de Tocqueville, in one of his books, says, "Though I care but little about the study of philosophy as such, I have always been struck with the influence which it has exerted over the things which seem to be the least connected with it, and even over society in general. For philosophical ideas however abstract, metaphysical and apparently unpractical, penetrate at last, I know not how, into the realm of public morals." But the "how" or the reason of it is this, that the philosophy of an age is a kind of clearing-house expression of a felt and growing yet groping life or groping life-reality existing in the age.

"Just as Justinian's pandects only made precise,
What simply sparkled in men's eyes before,
Twitched in their brow, or quivered in their lip,
Waited the speech they called but would not come."

Now the philosophy of the present age, as all observing students clearly enough perceive—although it has been for a

time arrested or suppressed by the lust of war—is not a material, but a spiritual philosophy, interpreting human life not in terms of matter but in terms of spirit. And it is the current philosophy, not simply as a current above the earth in the air, but because it represents a current in human life on the earth; because it expresses beneath the hard surface crust of our material things some nascent spiritual life which is today beginning to work and to make itself felt. A few years ago that was not the case, or not so much the case. The current philosophy then was a material philosophy, because the current life was then a material life, which Emerson described when in speaking of his own generation, he said:

“Today is the day of the chattel,
Web to weave and corn to grind;
Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

And so they did. And so they do now to some extent, to a great extent, but not to the same extent. A reaction has set in, and men have begun to find, not as the result of theoretical teaching but of their own growing and practical experience that they cannot live and find themselves, their full and normal selves, by means of bread alone, or by the material equivalents of bread. And so today they are reaching out after something else and more and beginning to take or to try to take something like a spiritual life or spiritual culture on. It is not only the few who are trying to do it; the many are trying to do it, the “common” people as we call them; Lincoln’s people; they too are trying to take some spiritual culture on, through libraries and lectures and Chautauqua assemblies and university extension courses, and in many other ways, not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself. It may indeed be fairly called a democratic movement, this movement towards some kind of spiritual life and culture, a movement of the people; not all of them of course, but many of them and more than ever before. Hence we find as expressive of all this that the current and appealing philosophy, the philosophy that is in the saddle today and riding mankind, is not a material but spiritual philosophy, and riding indeed so hard that it is riding some of the people off into strange bridle paths.

If then it be true that the current philosophy of any particular age is not merely a dream or dreamy speculation of fascinating interest to the metaphysical mind but the reflection rather of some real and growing life in the age itself, then does the spiritual philosophy which is current in this age bear witness to the existence in the age itself of some emerging spiritual life or spiritual value in it. It is in short the testimony of the age itself, apart from all other testimony, to the reality of the spiritual life, to which the Church must minister if it would minister to the age and bring it back to God.

But the real and sober thought of an age, its governing thought, is expressed not only by its philosophic voice but also by what is commonly called its "scientific" voice. And what today is that scientific voice? Is it too giving a spiritual message to us? There was a time, not long ago, some of us are old enough to remember it, when it was not a spiritual message, when we used to hear much about the conflict between science and religion or the spiritual postulates of religion. Many sermons were preached upon the subject and many volumes written. And yet, even then, some of the best and greatest and most effective preachers, ignoring this alleged conflict and contention and believing in the power of a spiritual message to elicit a response, made that spiritual message the burden of their preaching. Some of us can remember again a saying of Phillips Brooks, for instance, that never throughout the whole course of his ministry had he preached a single sermon on the conflict between science and religion. That was rather unusual then, but now it is not unusual. For that alleged conflict has now become an anachronism; it is obsolete and gone, or nearly though not altogether gone; for it still lingers on, or the echo of it does, in some belated minds, as a rudimentary survival of a past generation.

But how rapidly things have changed in these later days! Science is not hostile to religion now or to the spiritual postulates of religion, and the voice with which it speaks, like the voice of modern philosophy, is beginning to take a spiritual accent on and to give a spiritual message. Lest it should be thought that I am biased in my opinion by my own religious calling, let me quote what an up-to-date scientist has said; and

although he does not say anything that you do not already know it may be well to hear it from a scientific source:

"The foundation on which has rested," he says, "the material school of thought, from Lucretius down to the present time, is the ultimate atom of matter, which was supposed and alleged to be the simple and primal basis of the universe and of all reality. Of late, however," he continues, "this foundation has been rudely shaken, if not overthrown; for now we know as the result of further scientific analysis that the atom of matter although of inconceivable minuteness is in its structure exceedingly complex, at least one hundred millions being contained in the least visible point under the highest microscopic power. It is in short a solar system in miniature, and each of these atoms again consists of still more minute negative electrons swiftly revolving around some positive central nucleus. Even the comparatively gross and complex atoms of gaseous matter move among themselves so swiftly that each of them encounters its neighbor some six thousand millions of times in every second."

These are inconceivable and overwhelming figures, but they are scientific figures, figures which go to show that all the things we see and touch and handle or sensibly perceive, that all phenomena are but unseen molecular motions in the all-pervading, impenetrable, inscrutable, elusive ether of space. And so, he adds significantly, science in its progress is resolving the seen into the unseen and confirming what we have long ago been told, that "the things which are seen were not made of the things which do appear."

I have quoted in substance the language of Sir William Barrett, F.R.S. As the result therefore of that infinitesimal analysis which represents the trend of modern scientific thought, science itself has sifted itself from the "ore of materialism," and matter is seen to be not the primary but the secondary expression of reality. Or, putting it in another way, the current of scientific thought as it has been traced further down the stream, and still further and further down, has been found at last to vanish and disappear and go into things unseen and eternal, thus widening out the horizon of our modern thought until it has become a spiritual horizon and given to our human life a spiritual environment.

Here then we have the two voices of the age, its two interpreting voices, not imposed upon it but proceeding from it, its philosophy and its science; one of them testifying to the reality of a spiritual life, and the other to the reality of a spiritual environment. But that is the voice or message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the reality of a spiritual life in the midst of a spiritual environment. This Gospel, therefore, of Jesus Christ is not something obscurant or out of date, but something rather up-to-date, the very latest date, and giving to the modern world for its modern needs and uses a circulating medium which, although it was minted long ago in the past, is now more than ever the current coin of the realm, ringing real and true. Or, changing the metaphor, this Gospel of Jesus Christ, is not an evening twilight, beautiful and peaceful yet slowly fading away and receding into the dark; it is a morning dawn, full of hope and promise, rising over the hills, filling the valleys and flooding the plains and making clear or clearer what the modern world itself is beginning to perceive,—the reality of a spiritual life in the midst of a spiritual environment. We sometimes hear men talk or speculate about the religion of the future and what it will or ought to be, that religion of the future. Well, personally I have no misgivings about the religion of the future; but even if I had, we are not living in the future, we are living in the present, we are feeling the needs of the present, we are facing the evils of the present; this living, beating, throbbing Present, with all its hopes and fears. And whatever the religion of the future may be—and sufficient unto the future is the future—the religion of the present and for the present, for its present needs and ailments and for the confirmation of all its brightest hopes, is the old, or if men please to call it so, the old-fashioned religion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, asserting and proclaiming what the present age itself through its own self-revealing or self-interpreting voices, is beginning to perceive,—the reality of a spiritual life in the midst of a spiritual environment.

And this testimony of the age is not confined to a certain part or section of the age, *our* part of it, and which with a self-flattering complacency we are wont to call the more cultivated part, and then to speak of the other part as something foreign to us. We cannot make that cleavage today; it does not exist; there

is no foreign part; the very word "foreign" is passing out of use, if not from the vocabulary of the Church at least from the vocabulary of the age; and, Kipling notwithstanding, the east and west can meet and do meet, they are meeting now; not merely in armed preparation for war, but in something which in time will do away with war. They are meeting today in thought, in the real, true and sober thought of the age. They are meeting in scientific thought, the science of the west penetrating the east. They are meeting in philosophic thought, the philosophy of the east penetrating the west. Or, putting it in another way, the new spiritual philosophy which is springing up in the west, is touching, meeting and mingling with and appealing to the east. I was recently told by a gentleman (not a missionary), who had had exceptional opportunity for noting and observing the thought—habit of modern Japan, that the thing which there impressed him most was not the remarkable physical or material development of the nation, but the avidity, "the remarkable avidity," he called it, with which the philosophic writings of Eucken (not his recent pronouncements, but his philosophic writings) were sought, read and studied by the people of Japan. It amounted, he said, to almost a physical hunger.

Yes, the east and the west are meeting today, and there as here the real, true and sober thought of the age is beginning to bear witness to the reality of a spiritual life in the midst of a spiritual environment. Everywhere, both east and west, the age is ripe and ready for the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and if the Church would do a really modern work, abreast of the time and up to date, it must do a foreign work, or what it still persists in calling a "foreign" work. I have not the time to dwell on this, or to speak of the Church's method through its Board of Missions of carrying on this work. That is a matter of detail which does not come within the scope of my present purpose, and I will say but this,—If the missionary method of the Church through its Board of Missions is at the present time faulty and defective, let us by all means correct it, but let us not turn the power off; rather let us try while improving these mechanical things, to keep the power on. For it is the mark of statesmanship in the Church, as elsewhere, "to improve the machinery without impairing the energy which keeps the machinery in mo-

*If only the President
would speak to our
Japanese brother about
Peace!*

tion." But that, as I have said, is a matter of detail, and I am speaking now not of details but of fundamentals. What I am trying to stress and emphasize is this,—that the present age is ripe for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that now is the time for the Church not to delete or lower or compromise its spiritual message to men, and not to hold it back from either east or west, but more confidently than ever, more hopefully than ever, to publish and proclaim it, and to call upon the people, east and west and everywhere, and in everything, not only in every private thing, but in everything, public as well as private, to seek first the Kingdom of God. In that way too will it help to make the new democracy which is coming, which is surely coming, which is rising on the world and spreading through the nations both in the east and west, and which neither statecraft, nor Cæsar-craft, nor war-craft, nor Church-craft can stop; not chiefly or not merely a scramble and a grab, a greedy grab and scramble, by nations or by individuals, but a great and growing spiritual force for the social growth and progress of the world, and to help it thus to reach that destiny still undetermined which in the providence of God awaits it in the future.

I referred at the outset to the present war: How shall we heal or cure that strife whose fearful loss and ravage, whose manifold forms of suffering it is impossible for language to depict? Or, how shall we prevent a future recurrence of it? By international treaties and arbitration courts? All that, of course, is good, very good. It is helpful and much to be desired and should be in every way encouraged and promoted. And yet must we go more deeply down than that, more deeply down than nationalism, with its national prides and ambitions and national glorifications; otherwise we shall find that we are building our national houses on the sand, and that when the storms of passion, of national passion, come, and jealousy and greed, and frictional attrition and all the winds and tempests of national pride and honor come and beat upon those houses, they will surely fall, as they are falling now, into the desolations and desecrations of a war without a parallel in the history of mankind, and shall be made to see as we are seeing now, how great is the fall thereof.

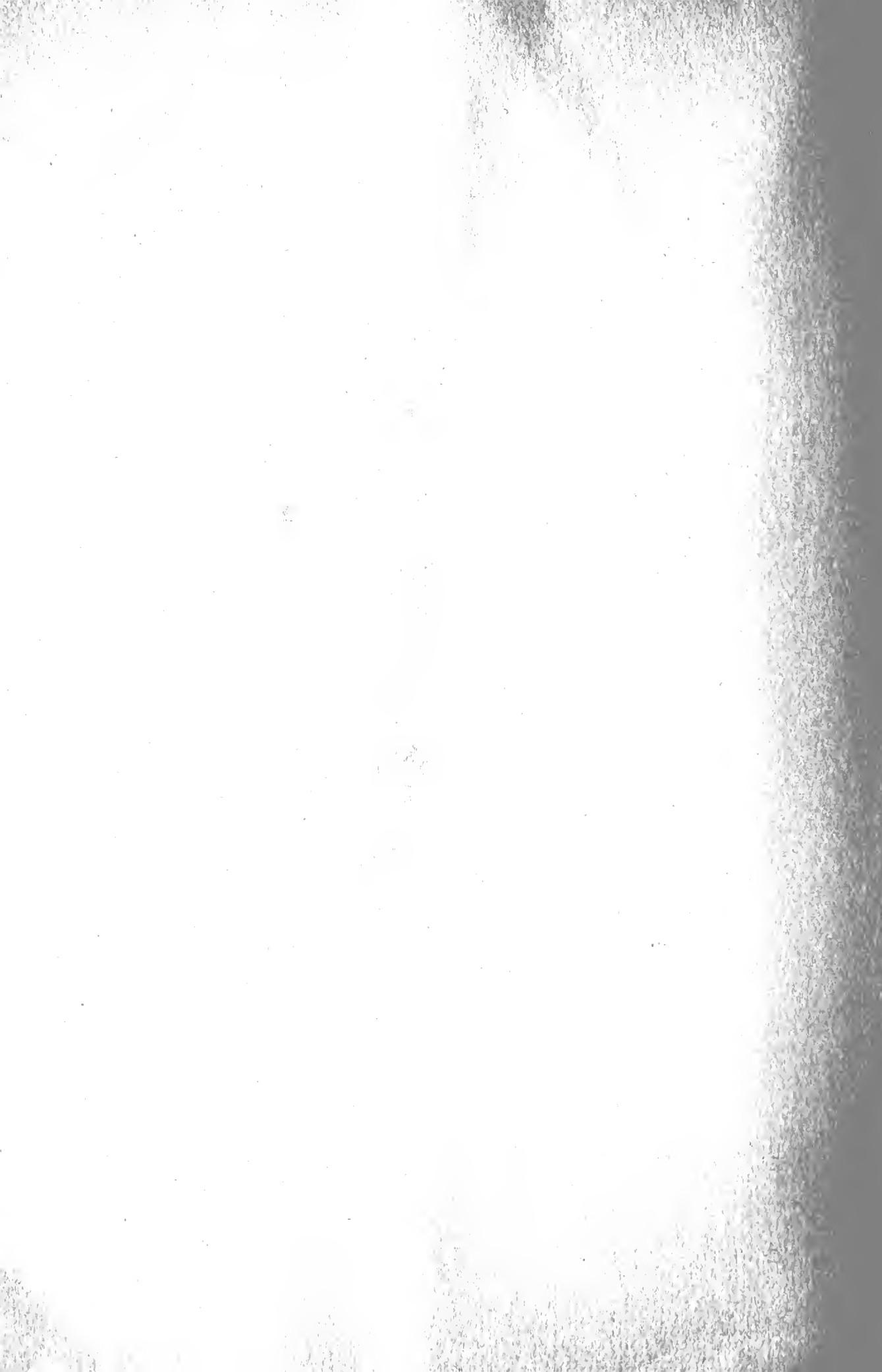
Yes, we must go more deeply down, and touch and reach

foundations, and build upon a rock; and Jesus Christ is the Rock, not only for the security of the individual life, not only for the security and safety of the Church, but also for the security and safety of the nations; and not until the nations hear and heed His voice, speaking and saying to them, "Seek first the Kingdom of God," will strifes and wars and national conflicts cease, and national strength and safety and national greatness come.

It is a hard thing to attempt, even to attempt this kind of national greatness, harder far than fighting. It is a brave thing to attempt, braver far than fighting; but it is coming. The real, true and sober thought of the age is preparing the way for its coming, and the wars of the nations cannot stop, cannot hinder its coming. Through failures and reverses as well as through successes, under the helping guidance of the Christian Church, teaching, preaching and *living* the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it will continue to come.

"Strive if ye will, to seal the fountains
That send the Spring thro' leaf and spray;
Drive back the sun from the eastern mountains
Then—bid this mightier movement stay.

It is the dawn of Peace. The Nations
From East to West have heard the cry;
Though all Earth's blood-red generations
By hate and slaughter climbed thus high,
Here—on this height—still to aspire,
One only path remains untrod,
One path of love and peace climbs higher—
Make straight that highway for our God!"



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